

# A Wobbly Strategy for Fundamental Change

Excerpts from Staughton Lynd's speech to the 2002 IWW General Assembly, published in the October 2002 Issue of the Industrial Worker.

Different ones of us may use different labels to describe the society that we seek. Whatever label we use, the good society to which we all aspire will be characterized by joint management and shared consumption of the good things of this earth. I don't think the difficulty we face is defining our objective. . . . Our problem is how to get there.

The Preamble to the IWW Constitution speaks of "doing away with capitalism." But how do we do that? Wobbly literature refers grandly to a general strike. Under what circumstances do general strikes occur, and under what circumstances might general strikes lead to the transformation of capitalism into something qualitatively different?

Sometimes it seems that the IWW vision is very nice but also hopelessly abstract and utopian. I know one previously committed Web who is now a UAW organizer. How many of us, I wonder, have so to speak a respectable second identity that we maintain along with our commitment to a new world arising from the ashes of the old? This kind of personal confusion is bound to happen when we collectively begin to wonder whether we really have a power greater than their hoarded gold, that is, whether we actually have a strategy to do away with capitalism.

That wonderful document, the Preamble to the IWW Constitution, sets forth two concepts that can be building blocks in a strategy for fundamental change. The first concerns trade unions. The second has to do with "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." Let us consider these in turn.

## The Trade Unions

The Preamble declares: "We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever-growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry... Moreover, the trade unions and the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers."

In 1905, these words referred to craft unions in the American Federation of Labor: In any given workplace, if unions existed at all there were likely to be a number of them, one for each craft, each with its own contract with the employer. These contracts would have different expiration dates. Hence the existing craft unions functioned to make it impossible for all the workers in an industry to "cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof." The American Federation of Labor was an American separation of labor, Wobblies insisted. The craft unions took from the hands of workers their one great power of common action, preventing workers from "making an injury to one an injury to all."/p>

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According to the late Michael Kozura, an IWW member and a labor historian, in the anthracite mine fields of eastern Pennsylvania from 1906 to 1916 there were as many

members of the IWW as of the UMW. Anthracite miners, Kozura writes, retied on wildcat strikes and other forms of direct action, refused on principle to; submit grievances to arbitration, tenaciously resisted the contractual regulation of their labor, opposed union dues check-off, habitually rebelled against the UMW's dictatorial leadership, and sustained this militant syndicalism into the late 1940s.

Away from the mines, industrial unions had to be created from scratch. Understandably, Wobblies and former Wobblies threw themselves into building local industrial unions in the 1930s. Len DeCaux wrote of his fellow CIO militants that "when the CIO lefts let down their hair, it seemed that only the

youngest had no background of Wobbly associations" ... Even when flesh-and-blood Wobblies were not present, local industrial unions in what became the CIO often exhibited a Wobbly style of organizing. The Westinghouse plant east of Pittsburgh is one instance. Just before World War I, Westinghouse workers created an in-plant organization made up of their own elected delegates which cut across traditional craft lines.

This organization; in the words of Labor historian David Montgomery, "copied the IWW by devoting itself to struggles around demands rather than negotiating contracts." More than twenty years later, when the CIO established itself in the plant, bargaining was at first carried on in the same Wobbly manner.

"Managers would meet with the leaders of UE Local 601 to negotiate about such issues as hours of work or layoff policy. There were no contracts; all agreements could be abrogated by either party at any time; and grievances were settled quickly according to the strength of the workers on the floor of the plant..

Many CIO locals, not just in anthracite mining and electrical work but in the core industries of rubber, auto and steel, initially opposed written contracts and the dues check-off. I had the privilege of knowing John Sargent, first president of the 18,000member local union at Inland Steel in northwestern Indiana. I heard him give a speech in which he recalled: "Without a contract we secured for ourselves agreements on working conditions and wages that we do not have today. If their wages were low there was no contract to prohibit them from striking, and they struck for better wages. If their conditions were bad, if they were being abused, the people in the mills themselves ... would shut down a department or even a group of departments to secure for themselves the things they found necessary.

The Wobbly Practices so widespread in the locals of the early CIO were snuffed out from above. Wobblyism was done in not only by employers, but also by trade union bureaucrats like John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther, and by government bureaucrats arbitrators and judges. In place of a praxis of direct action created from below, there came into being what historian David Brody calls "workplace contractualism": labor-management relationships governed by collectively bargained contracts. No matter how short, these contracts almost always contained a no-strike clause. After World War II a second clause became equally universal: the management prerogatives clause that gave the employer the right unilaterally to close the plant. Within a very few years, the new CIO

union recreated the obstacles to collective direct action that Wobblies had criticized in the old AF of L.

Nothing in the National Labor Relations Act (the Wagner Act) of 1935 required CIO unions to put a no-strike clause in their contracts. Trotskyist organizer Farrell Dobbs showed that over-the-road truckers could organize successfully despite the fact that their first contracts did not give up the right to strike. The establishment of workplace contractualism, with the inclusion of no-strike and management prerogatives language in all but a few CIO contracts, was substantially complete before the passage of the Taft-Hartley amendments in 1947 and the expulsion of leftist unions from the CIO soon afterwards.

The plain fact is that Lewis, Reuther and most of the other CIO founding fathers deliberately and voluntarily chose to include no-strike language in their contracts. They appear to have done so for two reasons: first, to show employers that they were "responsible" labor leaders who would help to maintain labor peace; and second, to control their own rank-and-file members.

These developments posed a challenge to the IWW. To recognize that because of savage World War I repression and internal difficulties, the IWW of the late 1930s was a shadow of its former self. Nevertheless, the IWW was the logical organization to critique workplace contractualism and to establish a labor left based on a structural analysis of the new unions. It was no accident that when C. Wright Mills published his book *The New Men of Power*, about CIO leaders, in 1948, he placed at the very beginning—as it were, in opposition to all that was to follow—the famous words spoken by Wobblies on the barge *Verona* as they approached the dock in Everett to reinforce the free speech fighters there in November 1916.

Sheriff McRae called out to them: "Who are your leaders?" They answered: "We are all leaders." The sheriff's men then opened fire, killing five.

Had the IWW been able to build a labor left in the late 1930s and 1940s, it could have used the words of the Preamble about the CIO. It could have said that the, new industrial unions of the CIO were still "unable to cope with the ever-growing power of the employing-class."

Thus, when a number of these unions struck just as World War II was ending, they were unable to maintain common front. The IWW could have gone on to

say that the CIO unions still fostered "a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars."

Today, this has become especially evident in the relationship between national unions headquartered in the United States and workers in the same industries in other countries.

Think of the protectionist policies pursued by the steelworkers' union, the UAW, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, where even the so-called rank-and-file candidate for union president (Tom Leedham) criticizes incumbent Jimmy Hoffa for not doing enough to keep Mexican drivers from crossing the Rio Grande.

Lastly, the IWW could have said in 1945, and could say even more persuasively today, that

"the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers." John Sweeney, elevated to the AFL-CIO presidency seven years ago to the cheers of dozens of left-wing intellectuals, has said as much, over and over.

When the IWW missed the historic opportunity to make itself the center of a thoroughgoing labor left, a more superficial kind of opposition filled the vacuum. First were the Communists, in their misguided romance with Philip Murray. Then came the Trotskyists, all varieties of whom supported Walter Reuther to become president of the UAW. Since 1970; a variety of ex-Trotskyists in entities such as the Association for Union Democracy, Labor Notes and Teamsters for a Democratic Union have encouraged us to view Arnold Miller, Ed Sadlowski, Jerry Tucker and Ron Carey as latter-day reincarnations of Eugene Debs who would lead workers to the promised land. The names are not important. What is important is the mistaken notion that the way to move toward abolition of the wage system is to elect new, so-called "progressive" personalities as leaders of national trade unions.

There is a name for this strategy: social democracy. Rosa Luxemburg denounced it as

"reformism." Lenin criticized it as "economism." Daniel DeLeon called such union leaders

"labor lieutenants of capitalism." IWW agitators invented a variety of names - pie cards, scissor bills, Mr. Block - for these same folks and those who believed in them. By whatever name, the social democratic strategy is first to elect new and allegedly better national trade

union leaders, and then to create a mass labor party financed by those very men. Social Democracy showed its true colors, once and for all, when the socialist parties of almost all capitalist countries supported their respective national governments in World War I. It is a shame that for the past 88 years we on the labor left have had to contend with various warmed-over versions of this discredited approach to fundamental social change.

In effect, sixty-five years - the period between the end of the 1930s and the present (coincidentally, my entire adult lifetime) - have been wasted. The challenge I put to Wobblies is to do now what you should have done two generations ago: Analyze social democracy from the vantage point of the Preamble. Draw as well on the scattered worker intellectuals who have helped to keep the Wobbly critique alive, such as our recently departed comrades, Stan Weir and Marty Glaberman. Reach out to rank-and-file workers to build a true labor left.

### Within the Shell of the Old

This brings us to, the second strategic concept to be found in the Preamble: "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." Criticizing the trade unions is the easy part of re-thinking IWW strategy, because it is negative. Now come the harder questions. What is the positive alternative to conventional trade unionism? How do we create it?

The relevant sentences of the Preamble come in its last paragraph: "It is the historic mission of the working class to do away, with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the everyday struggle with the capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."

What does it mean to say that doing away with capitalism is the historic mission of the working class? In Wobbly tradition I think these words are understood to mean that workers can do the job alone. ...But maybe we have been reading the

words- incorrectly. Maybe "the historic mission of the working class" is not a task that workers can do alone, but a task that cannot be done without workers. I want to suggest that the lesson we should draw from Seattle, Quebec City and Genoa is that both students and workers are required to change the system, and that they should cooperate as equals, as two hands clasped together in horizontal alliance.

The history of the 20th century demonstrates that students are characteristically first in the streets. And this is understandable, given the fact that most students are not yet committed to livelihood and support of a family, and are in a setting and a period of their lives where excitement over general ideas is encouraged. But protest grows to the point that it can threaten fundamental change only when the working class joins in....

Lynd went onto discuss how the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 illustrate this dynamic.

The Preamble also tells us that by "organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." Wobblies have taken this to mean that the instrumentalities of revolution will be pre-existing workplace organizations, connected, to each other in "one big union," and then acting together in a general strike.

But again, the words can have more than one meaning. They might mean that the instrumentalities of revolution will be new kinds of structures, created for the occasion. They might mean that when power has passed to the people, these ad hoc bodies will turn to the workers of hand and brain and say: "Comrades, you now have the opportunity to assemble for the task of carrying on production; to gather in those forms of association that you have found through experience to be best suited to your needs; and through them, collectively to

run the economy." And in fact, in the moments of revolution or near-revolution during the past century and a half we find that poor and working people did not conduct the struggle through organizations already in existence when the crisis began. Rather they acted through new institutions, created for the purpose at hand. Typically, these new institutions brought together all the workers of a given locality and addressed the common interests, the class interests, of all workers in that community. Often such bodies originated as committees to administer local general strikes. Typically, as the crisis deepened, the committee



would turn to positive tasks such as maintaining public safety, ensuring that essential medical services remained available, guaranteeing a supply of basic foods, and so on. Built from below, gradually taking on responsibility for the whole range of human needs, the network of new organizations became a dual power confronting the existing structure of government.

Such were the Paris Commune of 1871; the Russian soviets ("soviet" simply means

"council") in 1905 and 1917; the Italian committees that administered the occupation of factories after World War I; local general strike committees in Seattle in 1919, in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco in 1934; and in Oakland and elsewhere in the United States after World War II; the workers' councils of revolutionary Hungary in 1956; the inter-factory strike committees; first on the Baltic Coast, and then throughout the country, that came to call themselves Polish Solidarity; the workers' assemblies that met each day in France in the autumn of 1995 to decide whether to continue 'the strike for another day; and the workers'

committees that dismissed local factory managers throughout Serbia in the fall of 2000.

This is what workers do in revolutionary moments. What can be the role of Wobblies? First, Wobblies can foster the kind of class consciousness that emerges spontaneously when workers from different kinds of work and different unions meet to consider their common problems. Second, in the moment of crisis, Wobblies should forego preoccupation with calling something "IWW this" or "IWW that," and instead play the role of catalysts in the formation of parallel "central labor bodies. Depending on the particular circumstances, constituent elements of such bodies may include: informal work groups; local unions, independent and otherwise; what Fellow Worker Buss calls "minority unions," that is, groups of workers who think and act together but do not yet represent a majority of their fellow workers in a given workplace; and trusted individuals and small groups of many different kinds.

Paris in 1968 left us the slogan: "Be realistic, demand the impossible!" A few years ago, Seattle, Quebec and Genoa would have seemed impossible. Now the realm of the possible has been expanded.

## The Practice of Solidarity

In place of a conclusion, let me share one final concern. What we are about is a new set of values, the practice of solidarity. Capitalism developed within feudalism as the practice of the idea of contract. What was imagined was a society in which free and equal members of civil society would enter into mutually binding agreements. Thus, the free city. Thus, the guild of artisans. Thus, the congregation of Protestant believers bound together by a "covenant" (a different kind of contract). And thus, the capitalist corporation, its investors, its shareholders.

Of course, the reality was and is that the parties to capitalist labor contracts were and are not equal, and therefore the ideological hegemony of the bourgeois idea of contract has always been and still is based on a sham.

Counter-hegemonically, we practice solidarity. Solidarity might be defined as drawing the boundary of our community of struggle as widely as possible. When LTV Steel first filed for bankruptcy in 1986, Youngstown retirees debated whether they should seek health insurance only for steel industry retirees or for everyone. They decided, for everyone. When LTV Steel

recently filed for bankruptcy a second time, the United Steelworkers of America made the opposite choice: they asked Congress to subsidize the so-called "legacy costs" of the steel industry, not for universal health care.

But we must also nurture solidarity, not only in struggle with the powers that be, but also within our own movement. This is very hard but absolutely indispensable.

I have the responsibility of carrying on for John Sargent; for Ed Mann; who at meetings of the Youngstown Workers' Solidarity Club would introduce himself as "Ed Mann, member of the IWW"; for Stan Weir, who learned labor history from Wobblies on ship board during World War II; for Marty Glaberman. You will have the responsibility of carrying on for me.

This is as it should be. This is the deepest and most important solidarity. May the circle be unbroken.

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